

STOREFRONT

Art and Architecture

Kyong Park/Glenn Weiss 51 Prince, New York, NY 10012 212-431-5795

September 1, 1985

With this letter, STOREFRONT for Art and Architecture invites you to participate in an exhibition of new work exploring the meaning of "public art". Because the focus of nearly all discussion of public art has recently revolved around Richard Serra's Tilted Arc, we have chosen this controversy as a starting point. We are seeking written and visual proposals for Serra's Federal Plaza site that attempt to bridge the gap between the aesthetic elite and the public who responded so violently to Tilted Arc. These proposals will be exhibited at STOREFRONT between November 1 and November 24, 1985.

We are asking you and 25 others to attempt one of the following:

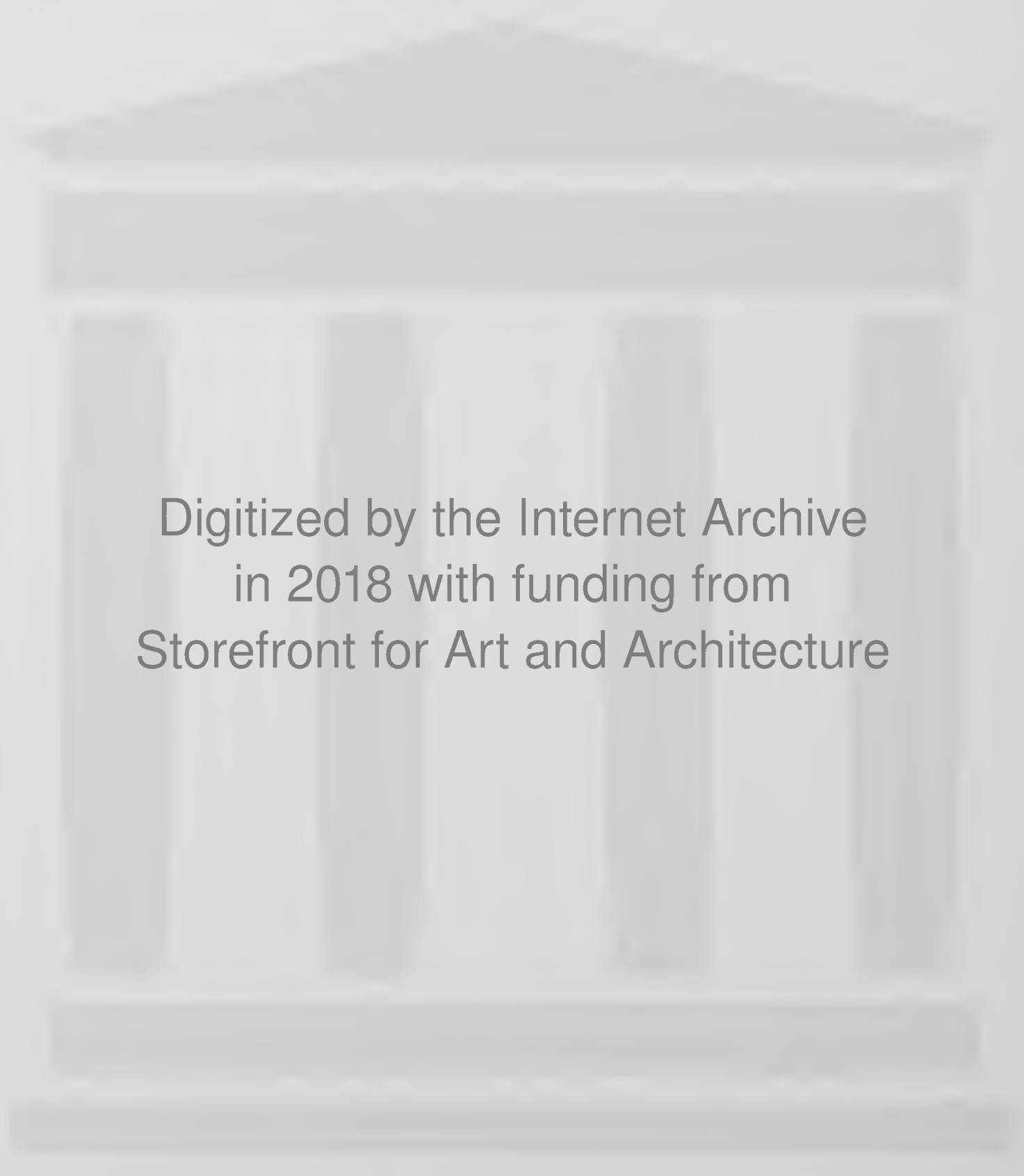
1. Explain, narrate, or invent the public mythology that Tilted Arc can provide for the average and sophisticated viewer.
- or 2. Redesign the plaza or Tilted Arc to provide a synthesis of the needs of the public and the Arc.
- or 3. Propose a new public artwork for the plaza.

Due to the size of our space, the presentation of proposals must be limited in size. If you desire, STOREFRONT will provide you with a blueprint and foamcore site model of the plaza and partial facades of the Federal Buildings. You may use the approximately 24 inch site model for a marquette or augment/substitute drawings, paintings or writings, no more than 24 inches square.

This exhibition at STOREFRONT does not advocate the removal of Tilted Arc. Rather, like other exhibitions, we have undertaken at STOREFRONT, (Adam's House in Paradise '84, and Homeless at Home, August '85 - March '86), public debate has created a foundation of ideas. The immediate situation requires intelligent action; the inherent cultural issues demand public resolution; and STOREFRONT wishes to inject a reasonable voice into the debate without simply advocating a specific position.

Please read the accompanying booklet with "site-specific" photographs, brief history of Tilted Arc, and statements by curators.

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Also find quotes by Serra, STOREFRONT brochure and bibliography about the Tilted Arc controversy. All articles listed are available at the Midtown Public Library (40th Street and Fifth Ave.), and STOREFRONT.

We wish to hear if you will participate by September 15th. Completed works must be delivered to the Clocktower by October 24, 1985. If you need more information please call Tom at (212)344-5425 or STOREFRONT.

Sincerely,

Tom Finkelpearl
Curator

Kyong Park
Director

Glenn Weiss
Director

Storefront for Art and Architecture
51 Prince St
NYC 10012
(212-431-5795)

MEMORANDUM

To: Participating Artists
From: Curators
Re: "After Tilted Arc" exhibition

Thanks for agreeing to participate in the Storefront's "After Tilted Arc" exhibition. We were very gratified with the response to our invitations. In fact, every artist who was officially asked to participate has accepted. Here, in no particular order, is the list of artists:

Dan Coma, David Hammons, Sandy Gellis, Vernon Shetley, Robert Parker, Tadashi Kawamata, Hannah Wilke, Bill and Mary Buchen, Deborah Ossoff, Anonymous, Leonid Sokov, Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, Scott Pfaffman, Kazuko, Nancy Spero, Hera, Dina Bursztyn, Jeffery Kipness, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Toshio Sasaki, Ed McGowin, Michael Sorkin, Steve Woodward, Allan Wexler, Sandy Kwinter and Francoise Schein, Rosemary Cellini, Carolee Schneeman

As some of you already know, the show will be opening one week later than originally scheduled!!!! Most participants were glad to hear of this. If it causes you a problem, call the Storefront or Tom Finkelpearl (344-5425). Here is the new schedule:

DROP-OFF OF PIECE:

Nov. 4th 5:00-8:00pm at Storefront

or Nov. 5th 5:00-8:00pm at Storefront

OPENING: Nov. 7th 7:00-9:00pm (The show will be open through Dec.1 Hours: Wed-Sun 1-6pm)

PICK-UP OF PIECE:

Dec. 1 6:00-9:00pm

or Dec. 2 12:00-8:00pm

Because of the great response, we would like to re-emphasize that the works must be limited in size. Thanks again for your participation.

After Tilted Arc

1985

“After Tilted Arc” at Storefront for Art and Architecture, November 7 – December

1, 1985

1993

Tom Finkelpearl

What I wish to stress. . . is the conjunction in Serra of real concern for his own practice as related to and emerging from that of the working people in this country. The sculpture now in question attests to his desire that people working or living near the site be confronted with an art that challenges, that does not necessarily confirm, their beliefs or tastes. He has wished, above all, not to impose upon them art of second-class or third-rate quality. We see in Tilted Arc the resolution to present working men and women with the same order of challenge that the middle and upper classes have found so interesting.

—Annette Michelson¹

The public is saying we don't like it, and we are not stupid, and we are not philistines, and we don't need some art historians and curators to tell us that we will like it. We don't like it.

—Peter Hirsch²

¹ Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk, eds., The Destruction of the Tilted Arc. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989, p. 96.

² Ibid., p. 123.

In the fall of 1985, the art world was abuzz with opinions and gossip about Richard Serra's Tilted Arc. The General Services Administration (GSA) hearings on the fate of Serra's piece, widely condemned in the art world as a kangaroo court, had taken place the previous spring, and nobody quite knew what was going to happen next. One thing was certain: the controversy was not fostering a dialogue. Aside from technical arguments based on the government's contractual obligations and the nature of site specificity, the artworld approach was epitomized by Michelson's statement. The general feeling was: "We, the experts, know what high quality art looks like. You, the local workers, don't—but in the long run, you'll learn to like it. What's good for us will be good for you." The artworld figures who testified at the hearings, like Michelson, tended to show their education and class in their syntax and vocabulary. In reading Michelson's testimony that Serra had, "remade and redefined sculptural practice and its theorization³, I was reminded of the question an artist once asked me, "Why's everyone always referring to an artist's 'practice'? What are we, doctors?" Iron workers do not refer to their practice, nor do the vast majority of office workers in the Federal Building. The art world was showing its (class) stripes.

The Federal Building's employees had no more interest in learning from the "experts" than the experts had in learning from them. Egged on by the GSA's Regional Administrator, they vented their bile on the hapless Arc, seeing in it a symbol of their powerlessness. They had no idea what the artists and curators saw in the piece. Neither side was listening.

³ Ibid., p. 95.

In this atmosphere, the exhibition, “After Tilted Arc” at Storefront for Art and Architecture was an attempt to reframe the issues, to look at the problems anew through the creative and/or critical work of artists, architects, and writers. Twenty-eight drawings, sculptures, and statements were mounted in the small gallery, from one-page typed statements, to beautifully crafted models of the site. Although Storefront was careful to state in all publicity that the exhibition did not advocate the removal of the Tilted Arc, it seemed that, from an art world perspective, the issue was not open to debate: we were supposed to stand together in defense of Serra, united against the forces of ignorance. In retrospect, there was some validity to the perception that the exhibition was hostile to Serra. In the Xeroxed publication (that served both as a request for proposals and a catalogue) we invited artists to:

Explain, narrate, or invent the public mythology that Tilted Arc can provide for the average and sophisticated viewer.

Redesign the plaza or Tilted Arc to provide a synthesis of the needs of the public and the Arc.

Propose a new public artwork for the plaza.

The second and third options clearly suggest that the Arc was not working in the Plaza. The first option is critical as well. As Nancy Princenthal started in her Art in America review of the exhibition, “The formalism to which Serra subscribes really brooks no

medication.”⁴ To “narrate or create a public mythology” for the work ran counter to its aesthetic. The words “narrate” and “mythology” are not in Sierra’s artistic vocabulary. As Scott Pfaffman pointed out in his statement for the exhibition, Sierra’s Arc had already been relocated by the sort of discourse that surrounded it. It had already been removed from its intellectual, if not physical site, and the exhibition did nothing to return it to its original place.

In general the submissions to “After Tilted Arc” followed the categories that were outlined in the request for proposals (explain, redesign, or replace). For example, Mierle Ukeles’ text and drawing offered a mechanism for explaining the Arc to the public. She suggested building an amphitheater in the dry fountain adjacent to the Arc for the express purpose of discussing public art issues—a place where the administrators, artists, and communities could interact. Ukeles, whose work has always shown respect for workers and labor, trusted that a dialogue was still possible. In some ways she was suggesting the creation of a permanent theater in which she could produce her own work—the integration of art and public life, aesthetics and labor.

The majority of the artists suggested ways to redesign the plaza of the sculpture to accommodate the art and its audience.

Michael Sorkin’s Serra in an Expanded Field, like several other projects, suggested that the Federal Building, not the Arc be removed. His humorous drawing of the Arc in a huge open space pointed out that as long as public commissions are sited in bland architectural environments, the art can never solve the basic problems. One percent for

⁴ Nancy Princenthal, “After Tilted Arc at Storefront for Art and Architecture,” Art in America, February, 1986.

art can never compensate for the 99% spent on oppressive design. For The Feminization of the Tilted Arc, Nancy Spero painted one of her (feminist) narrative scenes on the model of the Arc. Although Spero's painting harmonized with Serra's soft curve, it pointed to the grand, macho gesture.

David Hammons showed documentation of Shoe Tree, his guerrilla addition of twenty-one pairs of shoes thrown over the top of Serra's "prop sculpture," TWU, that was across town from the Arc at the time of the show. Hammons' hightops and platform shoes inscribed a Harlem/Dada sensibility onto Serra's Downtown/High Modernist work. He brought Serra into the City and out of the purely structural definition of site. In some ways, his was the most aggressive gesture in the exhibition, in that it was enacted on a real Serra piece in public, rather than confining itself to the safe haven of the gallery. The only other artists who ventured out of the gallery for the show were Bill and Mary Buchen, who created a tape-loop sound collage from interviews they conducted at the Federal Plaza. The level of hostility toward the Arc, and the misunderstanding of the artist's intentions by the "average person" on the plaza made the tape funny and depressing. One worker thought the piece was a wind baffle. Others thought it was badly in need of a paint job. The tape showed that the "local public's" opinion of the Arc was almost universally negative. Those in the art world who deny this deeply-felt hostility are fooling themselves.

In one of the Show's most popular works, Alan Wexler placed a group of miniature handmade lifeguard chairs in his model of Federal Plaza—just tall enough that people could see over the Arc. This comically solved the workers' lament that their interaction

was destroyed by the Arc, reuniting the two halves of the plaza without touching the Arc. The humor of much of the work in the exhibition was annoying to the Serra loyalists, but it pointed to the utter lack of humor in most public art. Ponderous assertions of authority are the norm in public art and architecture—from the equestrian statue to the Tilted Arc.

The most remarkable result of the exhibition as a whole was that six of the twenty-five artists came up with essentially the same proposal—to sink the Arc into the plaza. One artist, Sandy Gellis, suggested that if the Arc were buried with its top edge at ground level, it would continue to rust, spreading dark brown oxidation on the plaza, like a constantly bleeding scar. In fact, this is almost exactly what happened in a physical and metamorphic sense. Although the Tilted Arc was not sunk was not sunk into the pavement, its scar, the physical record of its destruction, is still on the plaza. As a metaphor, the scar of the Serra controversy is still with us in the public art world, and it shows no immediate signs of healing completely.

The exhibition “After Tilted Arc” may not have been the spark for a re-evaluation of the public art in America, but the controversy around the Arc’s removal was. Administrators all over the country began to take a new look at the process of commissioning work. The GSA, for example, reshuffled its procedures to be at once more bureaucratic (the GSA staff makes the final artist selection on the basis of an “objective” series of evaluation criteria), and more sensitive to the community, with diverse representation at the selection meetings.

But the changes, in general, were procedural and superficial. They were based on the negative rather than positive lessons of the Tilted Arc controversy, based on fear of controversy, based on fear of controversy rather than an attempt to understand what might be truly meaningful or educational to the users of the site. While “the community” is now generally invited into the artist selection process, it is impossible to define who the “community” is, and local representatives are rarely taken seriously by the panel of art professionals. More importantly, however, the goal of a public commission is still the same: choosing a “high quality” artist from the art world who has a proven track record.

In his essay for “After Tilted Arc,” Glenn Weiss hoped for a day when artists could leave the art world and immerse themselves in public life. Glenn and I developed this idea in an exhibition two years later at P.S. 1. “Out of the Studio: Art with Community” focused on artists or groups who were working on long-term projects outside the art world in communities from the South Bronx, to Creedmoor Psychiatric Center, to the NYC Department of Sanitation. The collaborative, interactive model these artists presented included an emphasis on process that the public art community has yet to acknowledge. The finely crafted object or “integrated” architectural detail still reigns supreme in the public art world.

The most basic lesson of the Tilted Arc controversy and the exhibition at Storefront, in my mind, is that prevailing model for public art was too limited. Serra’s approach to art is not public—though he has consistently placed work in public places. Conversely, artists like Mierle Ukeles, David Hammons, and Krzysztof Wodiczko create public art even when working in a gallery or museum context. When I look at their work, I feel that every

aesthetic decision is in some way public, related to a strong sense of the city and its social fabric. Their materials are socially and politically charged, from Wodiczko's design of the Homeless Vehicle to the transformation of street trash into profound contemporary metaphors by Hammons and Ukeles. Hammons has said that, when he is in the studio or gallery, what he has seen and felt on the streets comes out like sweat⁵—a sweat I did not see on the Tilted Arc or the testimony of its defenders.

In public art discussions, I constantly hear that “we want to be sensitive to the community's needs without, of course, compromising quality.” Which often means, “we need to choose an artist who is of the same ethnic group as the community, but this artist's work must conform to the standards of “quality’ determined by the mainstream art world.” Community sensitivity, the post-Serra legacy, has been reduced to narrow notions of racial or social appropriateness, rather than a true engagement in public life.

To

most people in our culture, the term “Public Artist” is still contradiction in terms. We conceive of the artist's endeavor as a private and personal pursuit of the universal, their inspiration as essentially spiritual rather than social or political . “After Tilted Arc” was an open discussion that led to a good deal of thought by its artists and curators.

However,

eight years later, the public art world is little closer to addressing the basic issues of public art and public life than it was in 1985.

⁵ David Hammons, interviewed by Maurice Berger, Art in America, September 1990, p. 80.

Tom Finkelpearl, New York, October 1993

